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TO THE SECRETARY FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2019
TAGS: PREL PGOV PREF MOPS ECON TH
SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER KASIT'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Madame Secretary: Your meeting with Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya on April 23 offers you the opportunity to reaffirm our nation's strong commitment to democracy in Thailand and our continued support for a broad-based partnership with this vital Southeast Asian friend and ally. Coming on the heels of damaging political violence perpetrated by the opposition April 9-13, the Foreign Minister will be keen to highlight the positive role Thailand can play regionally as our partner, as well as the steps the government will take to peacefully resolve a years-long political stalemate. Thailand is a vital military ally, a key economic partner, a close partner in refugee assistance, and a nation that deeply values its friendship with us. FM Kasit's visit this week, and your visit here in July, will publicly reaffirm that Thailand can continue to rely on the United States as the partner with whom it has its most important bilateral relationship.

DEMOCRACY COEXISTS WITH PROTESTS

¶2. (C) Violent protests orchestrated by ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD -- "red shirts") that forced the cancellation of the ASEAN Plus Six Summit in Pattaya April 11 and shuttered key parts of Bangkok the following two days did severe damage to Thailand's international reputation. They were particularly harmful coming so soon after last year's protracted demonstrations and eight-day airport closure by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD -- "yellow shirts") in the period surrounding the resignations of two Prime Ministers aligned with Thaksin. Many outside observers fear that Thailand's democracy is in retreat, and that the nation may be heading toward anarchy. This is far from the truth. The Parliament is growing in strength, and increasingly being seen as a forum for open debate. The judiciary remains independent. The King, to the consternation of many, but to the benefit of democracy, has declined to intervene to resolve political disputes. The military has refused to stage another coup, and has controlled street violence with a minimum of force. Nevertheless, an inability to keep political debate from spilling out of appropriate fora such as Parliament into the streets continues to fracture the nation.

FM KASIT - CONTROVERSIAL, BUT A GOOD PARTNER

¶3. (C) Foreign Minister Kasit is one of the figures at the heart of this political debate. A widely respected career diplomat, he retired early as Ambassador to the United States in order to return and help the then-opposition Democrat Party in its battle against PM Thaksin in 2005. In 2008, he

was one of the most prominent and outspoken PAD supporters during their demonstrations. His stances, however, were based on democratic principles, and he never advocated violence. Moreover, you will find him willing to work with us on resolving difficult issues like democratization in Burma, refugees, military cooperation, and economic ties. In that sense, he is a markedly positive improvement on his many predecessors over the last five years. He told me over lunch recently that he is eager to jump almost immediately into substance in his meeting with you. And there is a great deal of substance to discuss in our relationship.

OUR AGENDA

¶4. (C) The first order of business will be democracy, both in Thailand and in the region. The fundamental problem now in Thailand is deep societal fissures stemming from growing and widespread perceptions of a lack of social and economic justice in Thailand. Prime Minister Abhisit told ambassadors recently that he will call a special session of Parliament on April 22, the day before you meet with Kasit, which will debate this issue and start the process of reconciliation. You should discuss with the Foreign Minister what the prospects are for the process, and how the Abhisit government will be able to restore desperately needed stability in the country. This should naturally lead to a discussion of Thailand's role in promoting democratization in Burma. Thailand's democratic institutions are what have enabled it to cope with its entrenched political troubles. Now, more than ever, Bangkok should be able to speak with a voice of moral authority to Burma about the need for a more open government as the best means of bringing the country together. Kasit knows that you have ordered a Burma policy review, and is ready to exchange ideas about how Bangkok and Washington can better cooperate. We also process well over 10,000 refugees through Thailand a year. They come from Burma, Laos, and even North Korea and China. You should thank the Foreign Minister for his cooperation, but press for greater transparency on voluntary returns of ethnic Hmong to Laos. This is an issue of deep concern to us and many Members of Congress. You should thank Kasit for Thailand's ongoing effort to extradite Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout to the U.S. and underline that the case is a high priority for the new administration.

¶5. (C) Thailand remains a vital military ally, one of only five in the East Asian and Pacific region. Out of those five allies, Thailand offers us the best opportunity for multilateral exercises, live-fire training for our military, and a forward-deployment platform for U.S. forces. This alliance preserves political and economic security in the region and maintains a leading U.S. role in Thailand and Southeast Asia. We face increasing competition in this regard from China, though, which is ramping up its military ties with Thailand and other countries in the region. You should reaffirm your appreciation and support for the alliance, and note how vital it is for our mutual interests. I hope that you also will have the opportunity to press for deeper economic cooperation. Our bilateral trade is approximately \$33 billion, and American companies employ over a quarter million Thais. I also believe that our American corporate presence here offers Thais a direct example of transparent, responsible corporate good governance and social responsibility. Kasit may seek reassurance from you that the U.S. market, which is Thailand's largest, remains open. You should push for continued improvement of Thailand's Intellectual Property Rights regime, which the Abhisit government appears eager to undertake.

INVITING PRIME MINISTER ABHISIT TO WASHINGTON

¶6. (C) Finally, the Foreign Minister may seek to secure a visit to Washington for Prime Minister Abhisit this summer. Such a visit could be extremely valuable, symbolizing our commitment to this strategically important ally. It has been four years since a Thai Prime Minister has been to

Washington, and we could use his trip to reaffirm our mutual commitment to democratization in the region, deepen military ties, advance our economic agenda, and seek continued protection of refugees. Thailand also is the current chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and this would offer us a good platform to discuss our significant enhancement of ties to ASEAN and our consideration of accession to its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

JOHN